

SNATCHED FROM THE BRINK.

TIME—five o'clock on a sultry September afternoon ; the air is close and oppressive, the sky covered with clouds that threaten storm. Scene—the pleasant shady flower-scented drawing-room of a pretty old-fashioned house in a suburban road just outside the town of Leamington.

The room has two occupants, one of whom—the middle-aged lady presiding at a dainty little “five o'clock tea” table—is the present writer, Miss Catherine Dane. The tall, dark-eyed girl in white, who stands at the open lawn window, is my niece Sidney, the motherless child of my brother Colonel Dane, now in India, but shortly expected home on sick leave.

“Don't you want any tea, Sidney?”

Sidney is in a brown study, and I have to ask the question twice before she comes to the surface with a start.

“Tea? oh, is it ready?” she answers absently, and moving from the window, subsides into a chair near the table. “I was looking for the postman. He is late this afternoon.”

“Do you expect a letter from India by the mail that is just in?”

“Yes, I daresay papa will write.”

“We shall have him with us before Christmas, I suppose?”

“I suppose so,” she assented.

Her tone was certainly not one of joyful anticipation, and the words were followed by a suppressed sigh. It pained but did not surprise me to hear it, for I had discovered long ago that Sidney dreaded her father's return, though for what reason I could not even conjecture. The girl was almost as much a stranger to me now as she had been six months before, when first I received her beneath my roof. My brother had written to me requesting me to take charge of her till he returned to England, as her health required immediate change of climate. I readily consented, but soon found it was no light responsibility I had accepted; I had neither power nor influence over the haughty, headstrong girl, who knew no law but her own will, who accepted homage as a right, and repelled sympathy as an impertinence. In spite of her faults, however, I had learned to love my niece, and her waywardness and caprice only served to add compassion to my affection: for some instinct told me that they were but the outward signs of a deeper ill, a heart oppressed by some hidden trouble, and a nature at war with itself.

What could the trouble be? Anxiously I asked myself the question as, after hearing that significant sigh, I watched her clouded face. But the beautiful face kept her secret and told me nothing.

A sound of carriage-wheels approaching swiftly along the road

caused Sidney to desist from her idle occupation of breaking a biscuit into fragments, and look towards the window. The next moment there swept into sight a pony carriage-and-pair containing three ladies, two young, and one (who was driving) very youthfully dressed—and a gentleman, a handsome soldierly looking man of thirty, with bold dark eyes, and a sweeping tawny moustache. The ladies, catching sight of Sidney, kissed their hands to her effusively, and the gentleman raised his hat, as the carriage dashed by and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Were those the Lightwoods?” I inquired, as she turned from the window, her cheeks flushed, her eyes unusually bright.

“Yes, they have been to the flower-show. Mrs. Lightwood has a rival exhibition in her bonnet. Did you notice it?”

“Her brother, Captain Forrester, is staying with them still, I see.”

Sidney only nodded in reply as she handed me her cup to be replenished.

“How long are they likely to remain at Leamington?” I asked.

“I don’t know I’m sure. Mrs. Lightwood took a house for three months, I believe; they have been here more than two already.”

“Did you know them very intimately in India?”

“Well, yes, I used to visit them very often when they were living at Madras. The widow, Mrs. Lightwood, has always professed a great affection for me, though I fancy she——But that reminds me, Aunt Catherine,” she broke off, leaving the first sentence unfinished; “they are going to have a little dance to-night, and they have invited me.”

“Again!” I exclaimed. “Do you know that you have been there no fewer than six times during the last fortnight?”

“What an accurate reckoning you have kept!” she returned laughingly. “Well, to-night will be the seventh time, for I am going——with your permission of course.”

The last clause was so evidently *pro formâ* that it would have been almost more gracious to have omitted it altogether.

“I wish Mrs. Lightwood would not keep up her ‘little dances’ to such a late, or rather, early hour,” I replied; “and I am sure, Sidney, that so much waltzing is not good for you, with your weak heart.”

“Particularly when my partner is Captain Forrester,” she added, looking at me with a half smile. “You had better be candid, Aunt Catherine; you know it is not the dance, but the partner you object to.”

“I object to both; the partner chiefly, perhaps.”

“I wonder why?” drawled Sidney, lazily examining her fan.

I was provoked into answering plainly.

“Because he is a bold, unprincipled, dangerous man. That is why, Sidney.”

She flushed, and seemed about to make an angry reply; but,

thinking better of it, answered coldly, after a pause: "I daresay he is very much like other men: neither better nor worse."

"I should be sorry to think my circle of acquaintance included many men of his stamp," I observed.

"Oh! I am sure it does not," she returned, with a little laugh; "you may be quite easy on that score, Aunt Catherine."

"And I should be still more sorry," I went on, ignoring her remark, "if I thought that he could ever be more to you than a mere acquaintance. Heaven help you, Sidney, if you bestowed your heart on such a man!"

She shut her fan, and looked up with a sudden change of expression.

"Bestow my heart!" she echoed, in a tone half angry, half scornful. "You talk as if hearts were 'bestowed,' like prizes, as a reward for merit; as if love were a thing to be given or withheld, subject to the approval of parents or guardians. It does not occur to you that a woman's heart may be won in spite of her?—that she may love against her will, against her judgment, against her duty——"

She stopped abruptly, and the colour rushed over her face.

"What rubbish we are talking!" she concluded with a shrug, as she rose and returned to her old post at the window. A few minutes afterwards the front gate closed behind the postman, who advanced up the winding drive towards the house. Somewhat to my surprise—for she had her full share of Anglo-Indian laziness—Sidney gave herself the trouble to go and meet him, took a letter from his hand, and returned slowly across the lawn, a tall, elegant figure, in trailing summer draperies, with a yellow rose in her dark hair.

"A letter for you, Aunt Cathie," she said, "with the Southampton post-mark. It——why——good heavens!——"

The words died on her lips; she stood looking blankly at the letter in her hand.

"What is it?" I asked. "What is the matter?"

"It is papa's handwriting!" she answered, in a whisper of amazement.

"And the Southampton post-mark!" I exclaimed, and hastily tore it open, Sidney looking over my shoulder as I read.

"Radley's Hotel, Southampton, September 6th.

"MY DEAR CATHERINE—You will see, from the heading of this, that I am already in England. I landed from the *Cheetah* last night, and I should have been with you to-day (Tuesday); but my old wound in the shoulder has broken out afresh, and will keep me prisoner here, the doctor says, for the next forty-eight hours at least, if not for several days. I have just learned that the Lightwoods are living in Leamington, and that Mrs. L.'s brother, that scamp, Fred Forrester, is with them. Sidney has never mentioned their names in her letters to me; but I have no doubt that, in spite of my express prohibi-

tion, she has renewed the acquaintance which was broken off before she left India. I have now a still stronger reason to object to the intimacy : and I trust to you, Catherine, to see that she does not set foot in their house, or hold any sort of communication with them, till I come. I reserve explanations until I see you. In the meantime, believe me,

“Your affectionate brother,

“FRANCIS DANE.”

I folded the letter in silence, and looked at Sidney, who stood motionless, gazing straight before her.

“So for the last three months you have been deceiving both your father and me !” I said in a tone I had never used to her before. “You have concealed from him that these people were here, and from me that he had forbidden the acquaintance. I am disappointed in you, Sidney.”

“Most people are when they know me well,” she replied, with a faltering attempt at a laugh ; and, leaning her elbow on the chimney-piece, she let her forehead fall on her hand. Her back was towards me, but I could see her face in the glass, and there was a look of anxious trouble upon it that smote me with sudden pity.

“My child,” I said impulsively, putting my arm about her waist, “why will you not confide in me ? You have some secret trouble ; let me share it ; you would surely find it a relief. Will you not trust me, Sidney ?”

She glanced into my face, then looked down. Her lips trembled.

“I do trust you, Aunt Catherine,” she answered after a pause. “But—but I cannot tell you ; it is impossible ; you would not understand.”

Before I could speak again she disengaged herself from my arm, and continued, in her usual tone : “I suppose I may write a note of excuse to Mrs. Lightwood ? that does not come under the head of forbidden communications ?”

“If you will allow me to read it before it goes.”

“Oh, certainly.” She seated herself at her desk, and took up the pen, but instead of beginning to write, she sat for full five minutes with her chin propped on her upturned palm, looking out before her with a face of intent and anxious thought.

“It is getting late, my dear,” I reminded her at length : “you had better write at once.” She started and pushed back her hair.

“Yes, I will do it at once,” she said, and dipping the pen in the ink, hastily wrote a few lines, which she handed to me for inspection. I glanced over them and saw that she had excused herself on the plea of a head-ache.

“Have you an envelope ?” she asked, as I gave her back the note, “I can’t find one.” I left the room to fetch my letter-case, which was in the dining-room. When I returned Sidney said hurriedly : “Oh, I am sorry to have troubled you, Aunt Catherine : I found one

after all. There is the note, and she handed it to me sealed and addressed.

"For once the stereotyped excuse is not a fib, for my head does really ache distractingly," she added, passing her hands over her forehead. "I think there is thunder in the air. I will go and lie down for a time: I shall not care for any dinner, so please don't let me be disturbed. If I am better towards seven o'clock I shall go and spend an hour at the 'Cottage.'"

"The Cottage," which was the residence of my cousin, Lady Hillyard, was the next house to mine, and the two gardens communicated by means of a door in an ivy-covered wall.

"Do so, my dear. Lady Hillyard is always glad to see you," I answered.

She paused a moment at the door, turning the knob in her hand: then coming suddenly back to my side she put her hands on my shoulders, and looked into my face with an unwonted softness in her handsome dark eyes.

"Dearest, kindest, best of aunties, forgive your graceless niece," she said, with a tremulous smile; "forgive me, not only for deceiving you, but for all my caprice and ingratitude. Tell me that"—her head drooped on my shoulder—"tell me that you love me a little in spite of it."

"My poor child, can you doubt it?" I exclaimed, much touched, stroking the braids of her glossy dark hair.

She lifted her face and kissed me once—twice, and I felt a tear on my cheek; the next moment she was gone, and I was left to my own meditations.

That they were not altogether pleasant ones may be imagined. The more I reflected on what had passed, and the oftener I read my brother's letter, the more anxious I grew.

He could have but one reason for objecting to her intercourse with the Lightwoods, and when I remembered that she had been in constant communication with them for the past three months, with almost daily opportunities of meeting "that scamp, Fred Forrester," I felt anything but comfortable.

I longed for my brother's arrival, and yet half dreaded it; fearing some outbreak of his fiery temper.

It was not wonderful that I had but little appetite for dinner that day.

My solitary meal was soon over, and I returned to the drawing-room, and tried to occupy myself as usual, but found that I was too restless to settle to anything.

The heat, instead of diminishing, seemed to increase as the evening advanced. There was a curious hush and stillness, like the stillness of dread, in the sultry air, broken only by the distant muttering of thunder, and the frightened twitter of a bird, hiding beneath the leaves from the coming storm.

Night "came down with a rush" (as in the tropics) an hour before its time; at seven o'clock it was dark; so dark that, looking out through the open window as I sat alone in the drawing-room, I could not even trace the outline of the shrubby trees: all was a vague black void.

"Do, for goodness' sake, ma'am, shut the window," cried my old servant, Carter, when she came in with a cup of coffee; "the storm'll be upon us in another minute, and if I'm not mistaken, it'll be the worst we've had this many a year."

The words were hardly out of her mouth, when the outer darkness was suddenly rent by an awful, blinding flash of lightning which literally seemed to set the sky on fire, and, barely a moment after, the thunder crashed close above the roof, so close, that I involuntarily crouched and put my hands to my head.

Carter screamed, and clung to me. "Lor' a' mercy! it's like the day o' judgment!" she panted.

"Shut all the doors and windows," I said hastily. "I will go upstairs to Miss Dane."

"Better leave Miss Sidney to herself, ma'am, if you'll excuse me," Carter replied, in her blunt way. "I went upstairs a minute ago to see if she was frightened, and would like me to sit with her, and she answered very short that she had seen much worse storms than this would be, and didn't want my company."

"Was she lying down?"

"I don't know, ma'am; I spoke to her through the door."

The storm proved indeed the worst we had known for years. The sky was lit up almost incessantly by the red glare of the lightning, though none of the succeeding flashes were so awfully vivid as the first; the thunder pealed as if all heaven's artillery had opened fire on the earth, and the rain came down like a cataract, "sheer, and strong, and loud." In little more than half an hour, however, it had spent its force. The thunder died away in the distance, and the rain abated. I threw the window open again, and admitted a stream of cool, delicious air; then, turning up the lamp, which I had lowered during the storm, I took up my work, and sat down on the sofa.

I had set the door open, so that I could see across the hall, and half way up the stairs, and I kept glancing up from my work in the expectation of seeing Sidney descend, for it was now nearly eight o'clock.

Within and without, the house was profoundly still, and the measured "tick-tack" of the old-fashioned clock on the stairs sounded unnaturally loud in the silence.

I felt lonely and unaccountably depressed, and began to wish impatiently that Sidney would come down and keep me company.

"It is too late now for her to go to Lady Hillyard's," I reflected, as the clock struck eight.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, looking towards the stairs, I saw her descending. She had changed her dress for a darker one, and wore a long black cashmere mantle, the hood of which was drawn over her head. Her face, in its dark frame, looked startlingly white.

She came noiselessly downstairs and across the hall; opposite the drawing-room door she paused, and looked in at me, but did not speak.

"Surely you are not going to the cottage to-night, Sidney?" I exclaimed. She made no reply, but passed on out of sight.

Something in her looks and manner made me uneasy. Suddenly a thought struck me that caused me to start to my feet. "Suppose she was not going to Lady Hillyard's after all? Suppose——" I stayed for no more suppositions, but threw down my work and followed her. She had already quitted the house, leaving the front door partly open.

Going out into the verandah, I saw her walking rapidly down the side-path towards the door in the garden-wall. I called to her, but she kept on without heeding me. However, I felt reassured now that I knew she was really gone to the Cottage, and only wondered anxiously whether she had been so imprudent as to rush out of doors in her thin house-shoes.

The rain had now entirely ceased, and the night was as calm as if no storm had ever troubled it, though the heavy rain-clouds had not yet dispersed, and the moon was climbing her way wearily through their dark masses. The breeze blew fresh and cool, bringing with it the rich moist scent of damp earth and grass. It was all so pleasant that I was tempted to linger a little out of doors. I threw a shawl over my head, and began to pace up and down the verandah.

About half an hour had passed thus, and I was just about to turn indoors when I heard wheels approaching along the road. They stopped at my gate, and presently a hired fly appeared in the drive, and drew up at the door; a tall figure, muffled in travelling wraps, alighted, and the next moment I was in my brother's arms, pouring out ejaculations of surprise and broken words of welcome. After a hasty embrace he released me, paid and dismissed the cabman, then followed me into the drawing-room.

"Where is Sidney?" was his first question, as he glanced round the room.

"She is spending the evening with Lady Hillyard; we did not expect you till to-morrow. I will send and fetch her."

"Wait a moment," he interposed, laying his hand on mine as I was about to ring the bell. "I want to have a little talk with you first. Sit down, Catherine."

He tossed his wraps on to the sofa, and sank into a chair, running his fingers through his hair. "Handsome Dane," as he had been

called, was handsome still, I thought, as I looked at him; but his face was worn and pale, and there was a look of haggard anxiety in his dark eyes.

"Francis, why did you come to-night, you were not fit to travel!" I said, involuntarily. He gave a short sigh.

"That is true enough, but I was in such a fever of anxiety that I could not wait until to-morrow. After what I had heard I felt that Sidney would not be safe till I was at her side. About those Lightwoods," he went on abruptly; "how long have they been in Leamington?"

"They took a house here about three months ago," I replied.

"Three months! And he—that"—he seemed to have a difficulty in pronouncing the name—"that Forrester is with them? And Sidney has been visiting them? Good heavens!" He started up and began to pace about the room.

"How much do you know? what has she told you?" he asked, suddenly.

"She has told me nothing. I only know from your letter that you object to the acquaintance—I conclude because you disapprove of Captain Forrester's attentions."

"Judge whether I have reason to disapprove of them," he returned, coming to a stop opposite me. "The scoundrel is a married man."

For a moment I was too startled to speak.

"Does Sidney know?" I asked. He shook his head.

"He has kept it so secret that his own sister does not know, I believe. I only learnt it myself by chance a month ago. He has been married six years."

"When did Sidney first meet him?"

"About a year back, at his sister's house, in Madras. He was in a regiment of Native Foot, and was over head and ears in debt, thanks to high play and fast living. Everyone knew that he was on the look-out for 'a pretty fool with money,' to retrieve his fortunes—and the fool he selected was my daughter. He must have bewitched the girl, I think, for she has sense enough in other matters. Before I even suspected what was going on, he had induced her to engage herself to him, and had almost succeeded in persuading her into a clandestine marriage, knowing well that I should never give my consent."

"But he was married already!"

"Just so; but as I have told you, very few persons knew of that former marriage, and I presume he intended to purchase the silence of those who did with Sidney's money. He was aware that her mother's fortune was under her own control. Well, on discovering what was going on, I was indignant, as you may think, and I resolved to send Sidney at once to you. I breathed more freely when I knew that the width of the Atlantic lay between her and Forrester. My

security was of short duration, however, for a couple of months afterwards I learned that he had sold out, and gone, with his sister, to England. At first I thought of writing to warn you against him, but on reflection, I resolved to come instead. I got my leave at once, and sailed by the next ship—the *Cheetah*. On board, acting as valet to General Fenwick, was Forrester's old servant, a Frenchman named Delplanque, who had been his 'âme damnée,' for years, and was in all his secrets. Forrester had borrowed money from him, it seemed, not a large sum, but all the poor fellow's savings, and had given him the slip, and gone off with it to England. Out of revenge, Delplanque came to me and told me something that startled me—namely, that his late master was a married man. He had deserted his wife—a Frenchwoman—long before, and she was living with her own people. Delplanque had himself witnessed the marriage, but had agreed to hold his tongue 'for a consideration.' He added that 'M. le Capitaine' had boasted he should outwit me, and introduce my daughter to me on my return as Mrs. Forrester. Imagine if you can what I felt on hearing that, and how my anxiety was increased when I accidentally learned at Southampton that the Lightwoods were living in Leamington. Well, thank heaven I have arrived in time. And now, Kate, send for Sidney—or stay," he added, rising, "let us go and fetch her."

I threw on my shawl again, and we went out into the quiet night.

"Oh, the sweet English air!" exclaimed my brother, lifting his forehead to the breeze. "How it takes me back into the long past, when we were all together in the dear old home. I had looked forward to having one like it some day, Kate."

"And so you will have, I hope, Frank."

"Who knows? I have learnt the folly of making plans for the future."

We passed through the gate in the wall, and crossed the lawn and garden of the Cottage, where the flowers were pouring out their fragrance into the night.

The servant who answered our summons at the bell, and who was too well trained to betray any surprise at our untimely visit, ushered us at once into the room where Lady Hillyard was sitting, her favourite little sanctum on the ground floor, looking out on the garden.

A shaded lamp stood on the table, which cast a circle of soft but brilliant light on the books and papers, leaving in half obscurity the silvered hair and delicate high-bred features of the mistress of the house, who was writing. One glance round the room showed me that she was alone.

She looked up as we entered, rose, and after peering doubtfully for a moment at my companion, came forward to him with both hands outstretched.

"Francis, my dear cousin, welcome home !"

He took her hands, but his reply was uttered mechanically, and as his eyes wandered round the room I saw in them the same mis-giving that had just struck chill to my own heart.

"Where is Sidney?" he asked, hoarsely. She withdrew her hands, and looked in surprise from his face to mine.

"I do not know," she answered; "she is not here; I have not seen her to-day."

"Lucy, Lucy," I cried, hardly knowing in my agitation what I said; "she *must* be here—she came here; I saw her go—"

"My dear," she answered gently, "Sidney is not here, she has not been here to-night. Compose yourself, and tell me what has happened."

"She said she should spend the evening with you. I saw her pass through the garden-door at about eight o'clock, and she has not returned."

"Is the gate of your drive locked?" demanded Francis, turning to my cousin.

"No, not yet."

"That explains it: she came into your garden by one entrance, and left it by the other," he said, in a tone so unnaturally calm that I looked at him in wonder.

His face was white to the lips, and there was an expression upon the features that made them seem unfamiliar to me.

"Lucy," he continued, "you have a carriage, I think? will you have it brought round at once, without a moment's delay?"

She glanced at him uneasily, but immediately assented, and left the room to give the order.

He stood, with folded arms, looking down. I touched his shoulder.

"Frank, if we find them, you—you will not be harsh with Sidney?—promise me," I pleaded. "Poor child! her fault brings its own punishment."

He looked at me gravely.

"I will not be harsh with Sidney, I promise you," he replied, "but I have a reckoning to settle elsewhere." He walked away from me to the hearth, and said not another word.

In ten minutes the carriage was ready. I sent a message to Carter that we should probably return late, and that she was to sit up for us herself; then my brother gave the coachman Mrs. Lightwood's address, and we were soon whirling rapidly towards the town.

A quarter of an hour afterwards we drew up at the Lightwoods' door.

The "little dance" had already commenced; the rooms were brilliantly lighted, and when we were admitted, the widow, in an elaborate demi-toilette of "feuille-morte" silk and amber lace, was just sweeping across the hall, followed by her eldest daughter,

Carrie. She was a tall, showy-looking woman of forty or thereabouts, with fine teeth, a made-up complexion, and a false smile.

Expecting to see another of her guests, she was coming forward to greet us with some stereotyped phrase of welcome, when, seeing who it was, she stopped short, her bland expression changing with ludicrous abruptness, to one of very genuine consternation. Recovering herself, however, she extended her hand to my brother, saying sweetly as she ushered us into a sitting-room: "Colonel Dane in England! what a delightful surprise, and how good of you to drop in upon us directly you arrived. You have brought Sidney, I hope. Where is she?"

"Where is she?" he repeated sternly; "that is the question I am come to ask you." She drew back a step, her false smile fading, and, like myself, my brother evidently read in her conscious face the confirmation of his worst fears.

"It is as I thought," he muttered: "they are gone," and his head drooped upon his breast.

"They? who do you mean?" she questioned, hardily.

"Oh, Mrs. Lightwood," I exclaimed, "you know well that Francis means my niece, Sidney, and your brother."

"What—they have eloped? is it possible?" she said coolly; "but pray, Miss Dane, why should you take it for granted that I knew it? I assure you it is news to me. I am not in my brother's secrets."

"Not in all of them, I believe," interposed Francis; "you did not know, for instance, that he had been a married man for the last six years."

The change in her face was something to remember.

"Married!" she gasped. "Fred *married*! Nonsense, I don't believe it."

He took from his pocket-book, and handed to her, a folded paper, the copy of the marriage certificate. She glanced over it, then sank into a chair, her cheeks blanched to the colour of the paper.

"Colonel Dane," she faltered, in a changed voice, "I solemnly swear that I was ignorant of this. Fred took care not to let me know it. And to think that I have helped and encouraged him to——good heavens!"

The blood rushed over her face, dyeing it crimson to the temples, and she broke off abruptly, biting her lip.

"Undo, if you can, the mischief your help and encouragement has brought about, and tell me where I shall find my daughter," he returned.

"I will tell you all I know. In the note I received from Sidney this afternoon there was an enclosure for Fred—just a few hurried lines, telling him that you, Colonel Dane, were in England, and would be at Leamington to-morrow, and that she had made up her mind, at last, to consent to a runaway marriage. He was to take the next train to Birmingham, and wait for her at the station there; she would

follow by the one that leaves here at half-past eight, and they could go on to London by the express."

Francis glanced at his watch—a quarter to nine.

"Too late!" he muttered, with a sound like a groan; "they are on their way to London by this time, and once there—but I will follow them; if there is no train I will have a 'special.'"

And without bestowing another word or glance on Mrs. Lightwood, he left the house. When we reached the station, we found it silent and deserted. A porter who was lounging against the door of the booking-office informed us, in answer to our inquiries respecting the Birmingham trains, that the last "regular" had gone at 8.30, but that a "'scursion" would pass through in half an hour and we could go on by that if we chose. It seemed to our impatience much more than half an hour before the lamps of the excursion train gleamed in the distance. Every compartment was crammed with noisy "Black country" folks, and it was with some difficulty that we found seats in a second-class carriage—first-class there was none.

"It is odd," my companion whispered, bending towards me across the carriage; "when I took the tickets just now I made some inquiries of the clerk, and he declared most positively that no young lady answering to Sidney's description booked to Birmingham by the last train. Is it possible that Mrs. Lightwood has deceived us?"

I did not know what to think; it was all dark to me; dark as the wide vague scene through which we were rushing.

As I sat, looking out into the gloom, Sidney's face as I had seen it last, pale and grave and calm, rose before me with strange vividness, and would not be dismissed.

We did not exchange another word till, on emerging from a long tunnel, we found ourselves suddenly in the light and noise and bustle of the Birmingham station.

"Stay here while I make inquiries," Francis said, as the train slackened speed, and glided down the platform. "If they have—What do you say?" he broke off, as I caught his arm with a sudden exclamation.

"Francis, look! there is Captain Forrester!"

He stood alone, on the edge of the platform; his valise in his hand, his travelling rug over his arm, looking eagerly into every carriage as it passed. My brother did not wait for the train to stop before he leaped out, and as the other came hurrying up, still searching the carriages with a look of disappointment and perplexity, they met each other face to face. I saw Forrester start and recoil, but I saw no more then, for the train bore me on past them several yards.

When I alighted it was some moments before I could find them in the crowd. At length I saw them standing under a lamp, the light of which fell full upon their faces—my brother's white and stern, Forrester's excited and perplexed.

"But I assure you, Colonel Dane, that I have told you the truth,"

the latter was saying as I approached. "Your daughter is not with me, nor do I know where she is. She appointed to come by the 8.30 train; as she did not I concluded she had been prevented, and I waited, hoping she would arrive by this one."

"You had a note from her this evening; show it me," said Francis abruptly, after a pause.

"It will confirm what I have told you," the other returned, as he produced and handed to him a half sheet of paper covered with hastily scrawled lines, which I read over my brother's shoulder.

"Papa is in England, and will be at Leamington to-morrow. He is more than ever determined to part us, it seems. I have made up my mind at last to consent to what you proposed—a clandestine marriage. Take the next train to Birmingham; I will follow by the one that leaves here at 8.30. We can go on to London, or where you will; I trust the rest to you. I gave you my heart long ago; now I place my honour in your hands. Yours ever,

"SIDNEY."

"God knows I would not have betrayed her," said Forrester, who had watched our faces as we read. "Before noon to-morrow she would have been my wife, and ——"

"Who would have been the witness to *this* marriage?" questioned my brother, looking him full in the face. "Delplanque's successor?"

He started, and reddened to the roots of his hair, more, as it seemed, with the sudden surprise than any other emotion.

"Delplanque is an infernal traitor," he muttered, looking down.

"Like master like man," was the bitter retort.

"But if Sidney is not with you, where can she be?" I exclaimed anxiously; "she is not at home."

A vague dread of I knew not what was beginning to creep over me.

"Francis, let us go back at once; ask when the next train leaves," I urged.

"Allow me to ascertain for you," said Forrester. He hurried away, and returned in a few moments with the information that the next train was the midnight express. After a slight hesitation, he turned to Francis and added: "I shall hold myself at your disposition, Colonel Dane, for the next week, should you require satisfaction. That is my London address." He handed my brother a card, which the latter tore in two, and threw away without glancing at it.

"Gentlemen do not fight now, and if they did, no *gentleman* would fight *you*," he replied, with an emphasis which brought the blood to Forrester's cheeks. "If you had succeeded in your villainous scheme, I would have given you a villain's chastisement; as it is, I only require you to keep out of my path for the future. Come, Kate," and, drawing my hand through his arm, he moved away.

The tender, luminous rose-colour of dawn was creeping over the eastern sky when we reached home once more.

In the pale, mysterious twilight, the house, with its closed shutters and drawn blinds, had a ghostly look—a look that made me shudder, reminding me of death. The door was opened by Carter.

“Where is Miss Sidney? has she returned?” was my hurried question.

“Miss Sidney, ma’am? I thought she was with you; no, she has not returned.”

My brother and I looked at each other blankly.

“Perhaps she has left a letter,” I suggested; “let us go upstairs and look.” I led the way to her bedroom. At the door I paused, and obeying an instinct I have never been able to account for, motioned to him to wait, and let me go in first. I entered, but had hardly crossed the threshold when I drew back, with an inarticulate cry. The window was wide open, admitting the chill air and cold grey light of dawn; a small writing-table stood near it, on which still burnt a shaded lamp, and there, with her back to me, sat—Sidney. She was dressed as I had seen her the night before; her hat and a small travelling-valise lay on a chair near her. Her letter-case was open before her, and she appeared to have fallen asleep in the act of writing, for her cheek rested on a half-finished letter, and the pen was still in her fingers. All this I saw at a glance as I stood on the threshold; a dreadful fear clutched at my heart, and seemed to turn me to stone.

“Sidney!”

There was no answer. I hurried to her side. The hand I touched was marble cold; on the fair face I turned to the light was the deep mysterious calm which is never seen on the features of the living. She was dead. Hours before, God’s messenger had come for her, in fire from heaven, and without a moment’s pain, a moment’s warning, she had been snatched out of life into eternity; snatched from the brink of ruin, from dishonour worse than death, from long heart-break and bitter shame and misery. Even to us who loved her, it was not difficult to say “Heaven’s will be done.”

The unfinished letter was to her father, a few tear-stained lines, entreating his forgiveness for the step she was about to take. We ascertained to a moment the time of her death, for the works of her watch had been stopped by the fatal flash, and the hands pointed to half-past seven. And now occurs the question which has haunted me ever since. If Sidney died at half-past seven, who, or rather, *what* was the figure bearing her likeness which I beheld at eight o’clock? I leave the answer to my reader.

MARY E. PENN.